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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive analysis was conducted of existing public education programs in the State of Mississippi for school-age children and youth with severe handicaps. Specifically, the investigation focused on a discrepancy analysis of public school service systems for the target population in relation to eight identified educational practices common to model programs implemented nationwide: (1) home-school partnership; (2) chronologically age appropriate placement in public schools; (3) delivery of related services in integrated settings; (4) social integration; (5) transition preparation; (6) curricular expectations; (7) systematic data-based instruction; and (8) systematic program evaluation. A total of 65 of the 154 school districts in Mississippi were identified as serving five or more students with severe handicaps and 38 of these agreed to participate in the study. Interviews conducted with 124 special and regular education teachers and administrators and with 25 related service providers indicated discrepancies between current practice and the value placed on the exemplary practices examined, especially in the areas of social integration, transition preparation, and systematic program evaluation. Parents of 78 severely handicapped students were interviewed by telephone. Sixty-one percent were satisfied with their child's current educational program. (VW)

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A Comprehensive Analysis of Mississippi Public School Educational Programs for School Age Children and Youth with Severe Handicaps

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Acknowledgments

Our gratitude is extended to Wayne Fox, Tim Fox, Jacqueline Thousand and other members of the Vermont University Affiliated Facility for their valuable recommendations and directions instrumental during the beginning stages of the Mississippi State-Wide Systems Change Project. The data collection tools used in this study were adapted from surveys developed at the Vermont University Affiliated Facility.

Introduction

Programs for individuals with mild and moderate handicaps hold limited promise as models for the provision of services for children and youth with severe handicaps (Tawney and Sniezek, 1985). Yet, observers of activities in many classrooms across the State of Mississippi report simple caregiving activities or nonfunctional academic tasks for this population. Tawney and Sniezek (1985) indicate that models for students with severe handicaps have drawn on systematic and direct instruction, applied research and innovative practices. They outline five major philosophies that have guided the efforts of model programs for persons with severe handicaps.

(1) Even the most handicapped person can learn when the instructional environment is structured functionally and appropriately.

(2) Public education in the community and placements in neighborhood schools are necessary to meet the least restrictive environment provision of P.L. 94-142 (Certo, Haring, and York, 1983; Brown, Branston, M.B., Hamre-Neitupski, S., Johnson, F., Wilcox, B., and Gruenewald, L., 1979).

(3) Maximum interaction with nonhandicapped persons facilitates the development of the severely handicapped (Stainback & Stainback, 1985; Johnson & Meyer, 1985; Stremel-Campbell, Campbell and Johnson-Dorn, 1985).

(4) A functional curriculum directed toward semi- or totally independent living and employment skills for adulthood is an appropriate educational goal across the developmental age span (Sailor, Wilcox, & Brown, 1980).

(5) Educational goals and social integration goals should serve to normalize life experiences of persons with severe handicaps (Brady and Gunter, 1985; Falvey, 1986; Lakin & Bruninks, 1985).

Finally, Bruininks and Lakin (1985) point out that the gap between the state of the art school services and those delivery systems in everyday implementation is extremely broad.

Purpose

In many parts of the State of Mississippi, current public education programs for children and youth with severe handicaps do not reflect best practices seen in model programs across the nation. The purpose of this investigation was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of existing services for school age students with severe handicaps in Mississippi school districts, a primary goal of the Mississippi State-Wide Systems Change Project. Specifically, the investigation focused on a discrepancy analysis of public school service systems for the target population in relation to eight identified educational practices common to model programs implemented across the nation.

Methods and Procedures

SUBJECTS

A total of sixty-five (65) of the 154 school districts in Mississippi were identified as currently

(December 1, 1986; USDE, SEP Count) serving five or more students with severe handicaps. Letters requesting district participation in the data collection phase of the Systems Change Project were sent to all sixty-five (65) districts. Sixty percent (n=38) of the districts agreed to participate in the study. To insure that a representative sample of districts was selected to participate, the state was divided into five regions. Approximately seven districts were identified in each region.

Visits were conducted in thirty-one (31) Mississippi school districts. The remaining seven (7) districts had cooperative agreements with larger districts for serving their students with severe handicaps. Interviews were conducted by project staff with special education teachers of students with severe handicaps, special education administrators, regular education administrators, regular education teachers, and related service providers. A description of the 149 participants by respondent category is found in Appendix A.

Additionally, parents of students with severe handicaps in the thirty-eight (38) districts were encouraged to cooperate in a phone survey. The parent survey was designed specifically to gather parental information relative to public school services being provided to their children. One hundred and twenty

(120) parents demonstrated an interest in the project. Phone contact was made with seventy-eight (78) parents. The total number of survey participants including school district respondents and parents was 227.

INSTRUMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

The data collection instruments used in the study were adapted from surveys developed by the Vermont University Affiliated Facility. The survey instrument included five forms designed to gather information relative to the services provided to students with severe handicaps by special education administrators, special education teachers, regular education teachers and related service providers. The instrument addressed eight exemplary practice areas representing a core of nation-wide state-of-the-art practices for educational service systems to students with severe handicaps. Accompanying each exemplary practice was a series of specific statements serving as indicators of whether or not a program was implementing the best educational practice. For each indicator under exemplary practices, personnel were asked to designate whether or not the behavior was being implemented for all, some, or no students with severe handicaps. Subjects also indicated if they considered each behavior as a best practice for serving the target population.

Site visits were scheduled at the school district's convenience. Project staff met first with special education administrators and special education teachers to complete surveys. These meetings were followed by interviews with the remaining respondent groups designated as direct service providers for students with severe handicaps. Representation in each respondent group varied from district to district dependent upon resources available. Due to the sporadic schedules of some personnel, in particular related service providers, surveys were often returned by mail.

The instrument used in the survey of parents was designed to evoke both yes/no responses to questions concerning their child's current educational program and responses to open ended questions focusing on parental expectations and goals for their child. Data were collected from parents by phone interviews. Parents received a letter from project staff via special educational teachers describing the data collection phase of the project. They were asked to indicate their willingness to participate by returning a self-addressed stamped post card to project staff. A phone list of 120 parents who demonstrated an interest in the survey was compiled. Established criteria for conducting the phone survey governed the number of attempts (three) to contact parents, as well as the

actual length of the conversation. Following these criteria, surveys were conducted with seventy-eight (78) parents. A representative sample of phone surveys were conducted by two project staff to establish interrater reliability.

Data Analysis

Eight exemplary practices formed the basis for data analysis. Each of the survey questions was keyed to a specific indicator relating to one of the exemplary practices. Responses on the 227 surveys were tabulated for frequencies and percentages. These results were reported by indicators as well as by composite scores for each exemplary practice.

Appendix B provides a summary of composite scores. It is evident from these data that a discrepancy does exist between current practice and belief value in the exemplary practices examined. While all composite scores for belief value were greater than 60%, only two areas in current practice were greater than 60%, home-school partnership (64%) and systematic data-based instruction (74%). The greatest discrepancies were in social integration, transition preparation and systematic program evaluation. The lowest discrepancies were in the areas of delivery of related services, which also had the lowest belief value (61%)

and systematic data-based instruction, which had the highest current practice rating (74%).

Individual indicator frequencies reported by district personnel for current practice and for belief value are reported in Appendix C. As would be expected from composite results, nearly every indicator is higher for belief value than for current practice, suggesting that belief values are strong, but implementation remains weak.

Analysis of parent survey data is found in Appendix D. Parents were asked whether they were familiar with the following issues: age appropriate placement, social integration, community based training, integrated related services, transition planning and age appropriate functional skills. Results are reported by age group of children. Parents of children from all age groups were generally unfamiliar with these practices. Despite their unfamiliarity with these vital educational issues, 61% of the parents interviewed were satisfied with the current educational program for their child.

One question was asked of all survey participants, the results of this question are reported in Appendix E. All participants were asked: Given ideal circumstances and support, what is the most appropriate placement for individuals with severe handicaps?

The options given were:

1) Segregated School
2) Special class or a regular school campus
3) Special class on a regular school campus with nonhandicapped peers of the same age
4) Resource Room
5) Regular Classroom with Support
6) Residential placement

Although school personnel (n=75, 51%) overwhelmingly preferred placement in a special class on a regular school campus with nonhandicapped peers, 48% of the parents (n=34) preferred a segregated school. This parallels the findings of McDonnell (1987), who reported that parents of children attending segregated schools predicted that integrated settings would result in mistreatment, isolation and loss of services. However, the McDonnell (1987) study suggests that parents of children in integrated programs reported a significant lack of such problems. As McDonnell (1978) stated, parents tend to be negative about what they have had a lack of opportunity to experience.

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APPENDIX A

PROFILE OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

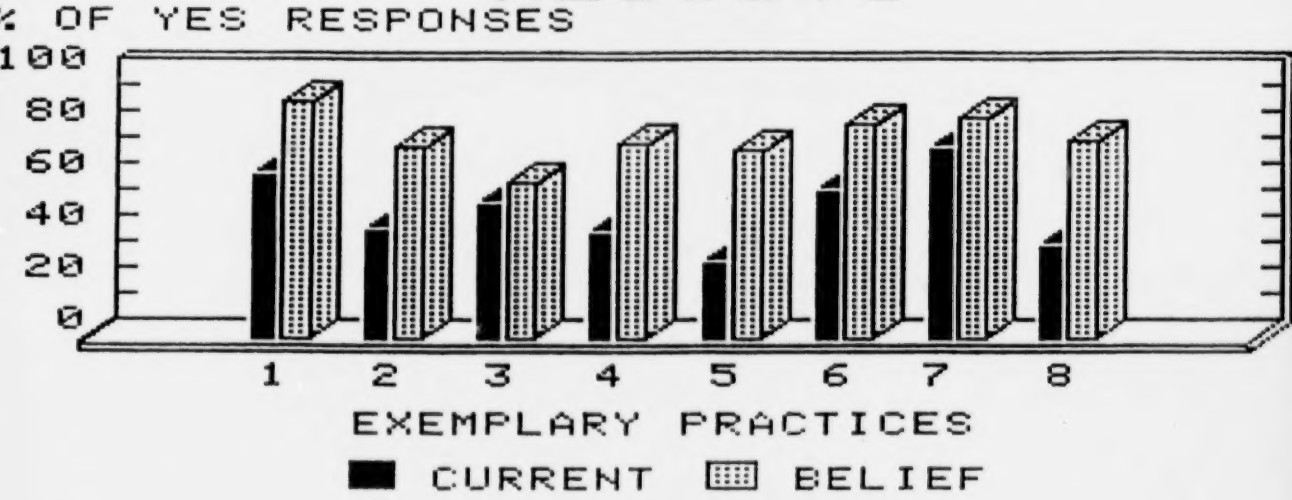
Profile of Survey Participants

Respondent Group	Frequency	Percent
Program Developers	28	19%
Principals	18	12%
Special Education Teachers	72	48%
Regular Education Teachers	6	4%
Related Service Providers	25	17%
TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	149	100%

APPENDIX B

COMPOSITE RESULTS OF STATEWIDE SURVEY

STATEWIDE COMPOSITE RESULTS



EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

1. Home-School Partnership
2. Chronologically Age Appropriate Placement in Public Schools
3. Delivery of Related Services in Integrated Settings
4. Social Integration
5. Transition Preparation
6. Curricular Expectations
7. Systematic Data-Based Instruction
8. Systematic Program Evaluation

RESPONDENTS

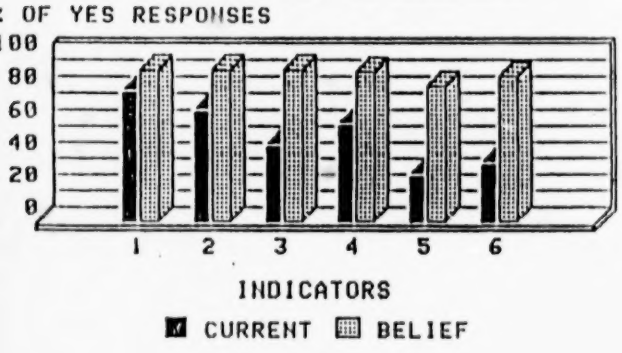
Program Developers	n=28
Principals	n=18
SPE Teachers	n=72
Regular Education Teachers	n= 6
Related Service Providers	n=25
TOTAL	n=149

APPENDIX C

DATA ANALYSIS BY INDICATORS OF EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

DATA ANALYSIS BY INDICATORS OF EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

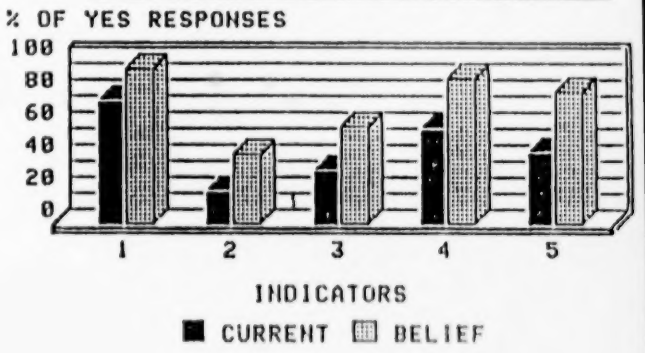
HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers

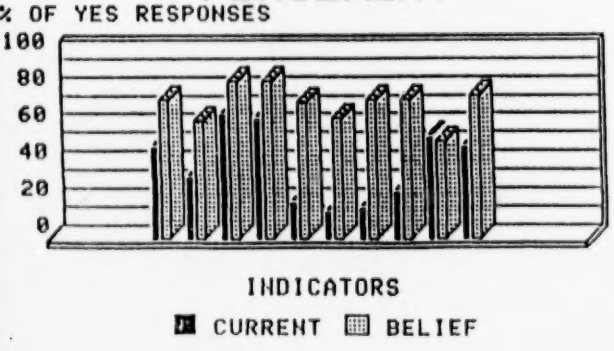
DELIVERY OF RELATED SERVICES



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers
Related Services

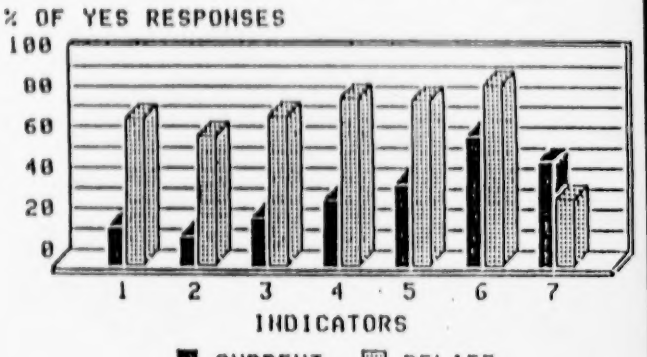
AGE APPROPRIATE PLACEMENT



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers
Principal
Related Services
Reg. Ed.
Program Developers

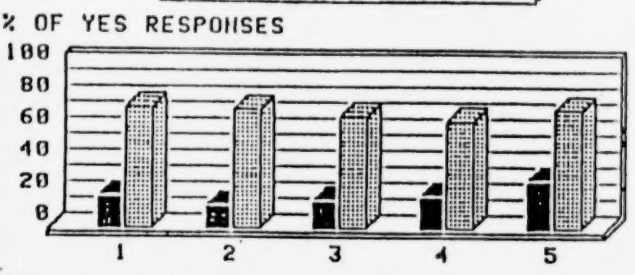
SOCIAL INTEGRATION



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers
Reg. Ed
Principals

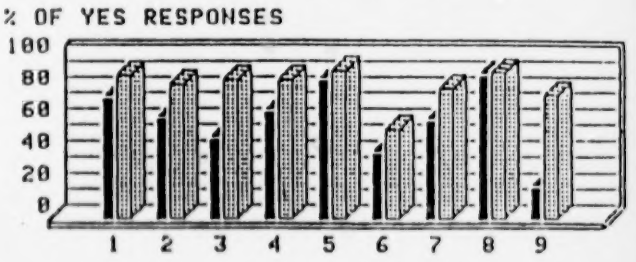
TRANSITION PREPARATION



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers

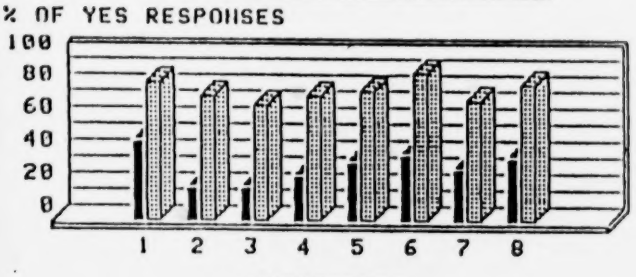
SYSTEMATIC DATA-BASED INSTRUCTION



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers
Related Services

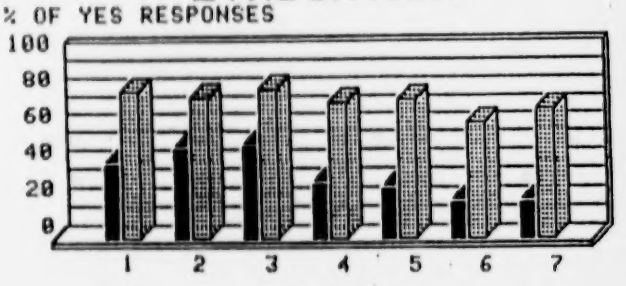
CURRICULAR EXPECTATIONS



RESPONDENTS:

SPE Teachers

SYSTEMATIC PROGRAM EVALUATION

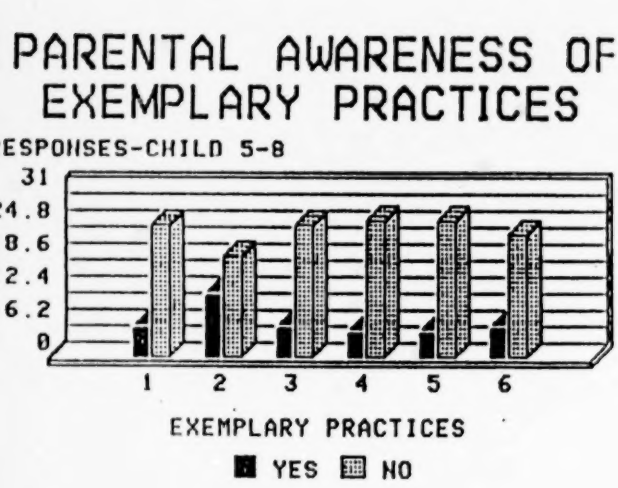


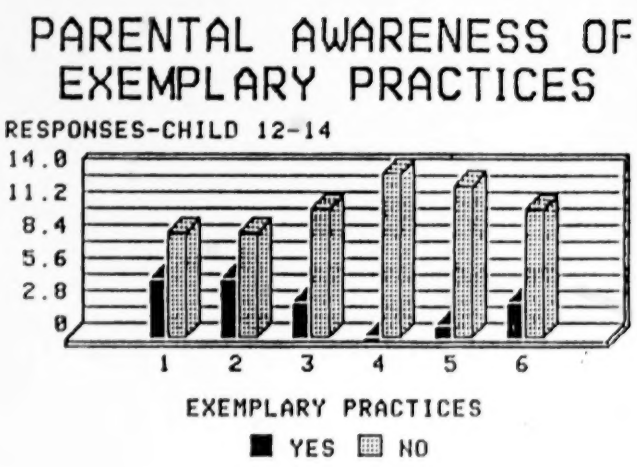
RESPONDENTS:

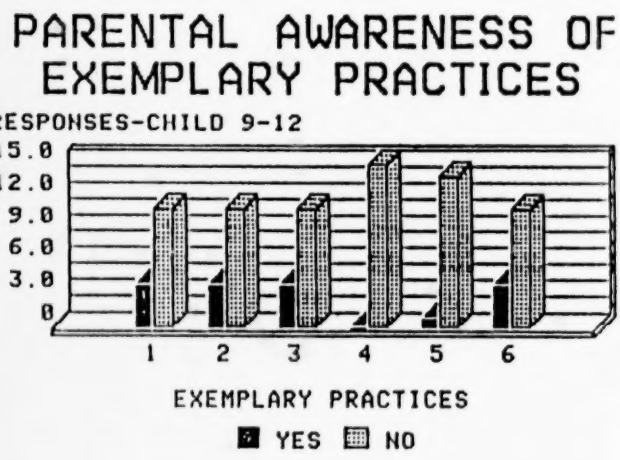
Program Developers
Related Services

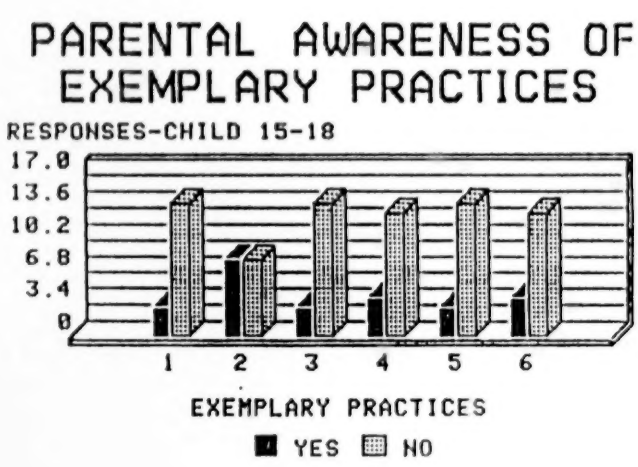
APPENDIX D

DATA ANALYSIS OF PARENT SURVEY





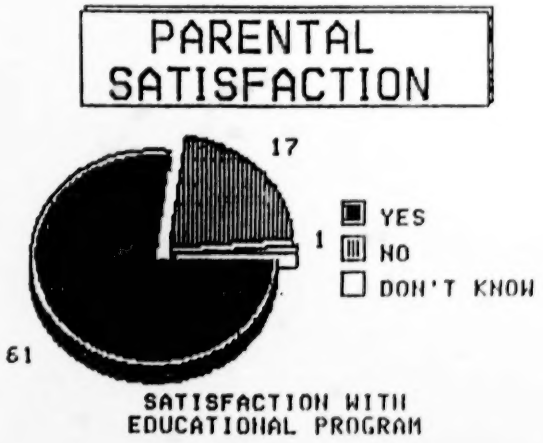




EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

1. Age Appropriate Placement
2. Social Integration
3. Community Based Training
4. Integrated Related Services
5. Transition Planning
6. Age Appropriate Functional Skills

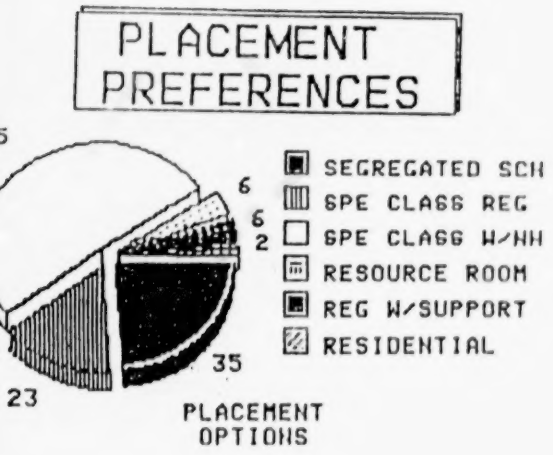
Are you satisfied with your child's current educational program?

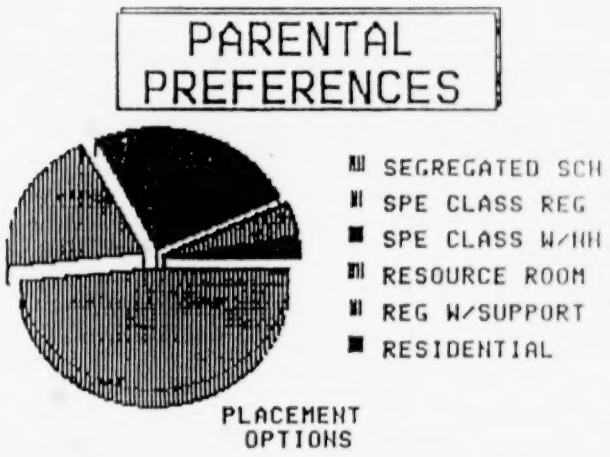


APPENDIX E

DATA ANALYSIS OF PLACEMENT PREFERENCE

DATA ANALYSIS OF PLACEMENT PREFERENCE





Given ideal circumstances and support, what is the most appropriate placement for individuals with severe handicaps?

1. Segregated school
2. Special class on a regular school campus
3. Special class on a regular school campus with nonhandicapped peers of the same age
4. Resource room
5. Regular classroom with support
6. Residential placement

PREFERENCES BY RESPONDENT GROUP

Placement Options	Special Ed. Teachers	Program Developers	Regular Ed. Teachers	Principals	Related Services Teachers	Total School Personnel	Parents
1	18	3		4	10	35	34
2	16	2	1	1	3	23	14
3	33	18	4	11	9	75	18
4	3	1	1	0	1	6	0
5	0	4	2	0	0	6	3
6	2	0	0	0	0	2	2